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ABSTRACT

Teachers and administrators in a midwestern school district met to assess the reasons for negative attitudes toward the district's staff inservice program. They agreed that the program's goals were too broad, the sessions were (for the most part) designed to motivate teachers to try but not to master a particular teaching skill or strategy, the sessions were too short for teachers to grasp thoroughly the concepts presented, and staff input into the inservice process would make the sessions more useful. A subsequent inservice planning committee developed the following inservice guidelines: (1) curriculum evaluation committees must provide an inservice component to address any recommended program changes, (2) resulting inservice objectives and costs must be outlined and presented to a district inservice committee that will determine priorities, (3) inservice will extend through at least one school year to allow for feedback and follow-up, and (4) inservice programs will provide periodic formal evaluation sessions. In the first phase of the inservice model adopted by the committee, inservice objectives for a particular area are established. In the second phase, compatibility, availability, and costs are determined by the appropriate consultants. In the third phase, consultants present the theoretical basis for the skills, strategies, or methods in operation; provide demonstration sessions; offer assistance as teachers practice new methods in inservice sessions and in the classrooms; present follow-up sessions; and provide assistance as inservice participants share sessions with other staff members. In the fourth phase, committee members and consultants evaluate the inservice process, and in the fifth phase, "mentor" teachers provide subsequent inservice for new staff. The model was applied to an elementary reading in-service program and was found to be successful. (HTH)

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AN EFFECTIVE IN-SERVICE MODEL

by

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The purpose of this session is to provide you with the nucleus of an in-service model that you can adopt, adapt, alter, or whatever to fit your particular needs and circumstances, but I can assure you, it will be effective if used properly.

National reports have centered a good deal on the preparation or the pre-service phase of teacher education, and some emphasize the need for an induction phase or transitional program for new teachers coming to our employ directly from their college or university training. (ex: proposed new certification standards coming out of various states.) And I agree these areas do need our attention but, since new teacher placement is at the lowest percent in several decades in many of our states, caused by declining enrollments, low budgets, and teacher oversupply in certain areas, most teachers now in the profession are going to be our staff members into the 21st century, so I'd like to focus this morning on what I call the developmental phase of teacher education, what most of us refer to as in-service, and the need for us to spend more time and resources in the continuing education of our staff members.

Think about these questions as they apply to your district. Why do teachers so consistently complain about having to attend in-service sessions? Why is feedback from such sessions most often negative? Is it because those attending have little input into what in-service is provided? Is it because the sessions are designed for too broad an audience, thus addressing very few real needs? Are the sessions too short for teachers to effectively grasp the concept(s) presented? Are the in-service goals of your school district designed to "whet the appetite" of teachers or are they truly outlined to effect long-term instructional and curricular change? What should be the goal of staff in-service?

I think all of us would agree that we ought to have an in-service program for employees. Too often, though, I'm afraid the program itself is an afterthought. Typically, we bring in a speaker who gets us excited about the challenges and opportunities. Unfortunately, when the speaker leaves, the euphoria created is soon gone as well. It almost seems as though, like so many other things in teaching, the in-service process has become ritualized litany that is "there because it's there." Both audience and presenter accept their roles in docile fashion without much questioning about whether any real change occurs as a result of the process. Each party deals with the affair as an entity unto itself; an end rather than a means.

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However, let's recognize and admit that if our efforts fail to reach students in the classroom, its real value is rather negligible. Thus, while such programs do serve some purpose, effective in-service requires much more than a one-shot approach. We must get past the knowledge phase of in-service to the practice and implementation stages. Most programs don't do this.

Because of this, I'm going to outline a scenario for your consideration. The questions asked earlier were all asked by a group of teachers and administrators in the Pleasant Valley, Iowa, School District, as they met together to try to assess the reasons for negative attitudes towards the staff in-service program. The answers were simple, the solution much more complex.

The Answers

Yes, the goals of the in-service program were too broad, trying to appeal to everyone from the kindergarten teacher to the high school industrial arts instructor and, thus, of real practical interest to very few staff members. Yes, the sessions were mostly designed to motivate teachers to try something, but not to master a particular teaching skill or strategy. Yes, when the goal was narrowed to introducing a particular teaching method to a select audience (such as junior high science teachers), too short a period of time was devoted to the process, with the results being poorly, if at all, implemented. Yes, staff input into the process would probably help make the sessions more meaningful (or at least palatable).

A Possible Solution

Research is showing that successful school districts place a high priority on continuous staff development. Therefore, scrapping the in-service program was not a viable alternative to the problems encountered. Good management doesn't spend approximately 80% of its monetary resources on staff salaries and then do nothing to increase the value of that investment.

We often excuse our lack of meaningful staff development by citing a shortage of funds. However, the problem isn't usually a lack of money, but usually a refusal to establish appropriate priorities. Most boards don't place a high priority on in-service, so we have to "sell" the idea. A commitment of 1% of the budget for improving employee skills is not unreasonable! After all, research shows that teacher skills are the determining factor in providing a quality education to students. If you really want to effect quality education, you're going to have to commit some funds to staff development.

Therefore, a thorough discussion by an organized planning committee of teachers and administrators in our district resulted in outlining the following in-service guidelines:

1. evaluation committees for the curriculum areas targeted each year must provide an in-service component to address any recommended program changes.

2. these in-service components need to be outlined as to objective(s) and projected costs and presented to a district-wide in-service committee that will decide a priority listing of requests, based on released time needed for implementation and the availability of in-service funds.

3. the in-service must be on-going, i.e., extending over at least one school year, allowing for feedback and follow-up, and will not be presented on consecutive days prior to the start of the school year or at the end of the school year (a survey of staff indicated these to be the least effective times for in-service sessions).

4. the in-service program will provide for periodic (at least two) formal evaluation sessions with representatives of those being in-serviced meeting with those providing the in-service.

The Adopted Model

The planning committee, working with the in-service committee, adopted the following in-service model:

Phase I: establish objectives of the in-service program in the specified area.

Phase II: contact appropriate consultants to determine compatibility, availability, and costs.

Phase III: consultants will provide the following:

a. present the theoretical basis and/or the content for the skills, strategies, or methods in actual operation.

b. consultants will provide demonstration sessions, allowing the staff involved to observe the actual skills, strategies, or methods in operation.

c. the staff will have the opportunity to practice the skills, strategies, or methods during an in-service session with the consultants, then apply it in a classroom session; this is probably the most critical phase of the process, for teachers are enthusiastic about learning new skills, but they are not comfortable in applying them. First of all, it takes more effort to utilize a new skill and, secondly, new skills newly applied always go slower at first than previously used approaches. But it remains a truth that a new skill must be mastered in order to be effective, and this can only be done through continued and extensive practice. It must become "comfortable". (Joyce and Showers call it "executive control".)[1]

d. follow-up sessions will be provided within a reasonable length of time that will allow the staff to review "roses and thorns" with the consultant(s); these sessions may be small, building groups, or through individual consultant sessions with the teacher in each classroom.

e. the skills, strategies, or methods will continue to be practiced and applied with periodic sharing sessions with other staff members, scheduled by the building principal and led by either the building principal or a staff member (it should be noted, that principals are involved in all in-service sessions and, thus, serve a leadership role in this capacity in each of their buildings; again, research shows that you can have good teachers without good administrators, but you can't have good schools without good administrators.).

Phase IV: evaluation of the process, with involvement by committee members and the consultant(s).

Phase V: assignment of building mentors to in-service new staff members, using the prepared notes as an outline for the in-service.

To summarize the model adopted, we said that successful in-service must support the old educational maxim -- teach, practice, test, and re-teach until the concept or information is over-learned to the point that the individual can use it.

Actual Example

The Pleasant Valley District has applied its in-service model in three areas since its adoption. First, was a four-year, K-12 composition in-service program; secondly, was a year-long administrative in-service on school climate and staff goal setting; and most recently, a K-8 reading in-service program.

As an example of the Pleasant Valley process model, the K-8 Reading Committee conducted a one-year study of the reading program and decided that its most immediate concern was with the low-ability reading students at the primary level. With the objective of in-servicing the K-3, remedial reading, L.D., and Chapter I teachers in improving methods of instruction to low-ability readers, the committee set out to interview prospective consultants who would follow the presentation-demonstration-follow-up format adopted by the District. Following the interviewing process, involving four well-known, national reading consultants, Dr. John Manning, University of Minnesota, was selected. Dr. Manning and the committee met to establish the objectives of the in-service sessions, following which he was contracted for fifteen days during the school year. Ten days were spent first semester conducting content and demonstration sessions in our four elementary schools, spending one-half to one day in each building on four different occasions. On these days, substitutes were hired to cover classes, and when half-days were required for in-service per building, the substitutes moved from one building to the other, following the consultant according to his schedule. This maximized use of substitute time at the lowest possible cost. One half-day was spent at the end of the first semester evaluating the objectives of the in-service and the effectiveness of the consultant.

(It should be emphasized that notes of each of the content and demonstration sessions were distributed to the in-serviced staff members to be placed in their Curriculum Notebook for easy reference. These proved to be helpful in follow-up sessions. All teachers had the same notes to refer to during these sessions.)

Four in-service days were scheduled second semester; two focused on review and practice of the content presented first semester, with the consultant working with staff by grade levels in small groups, and two days were spent with the consultant visiting with each teacher in his/her classroom, discussing problems in implementing the techniques being practiced. A final half-day of overall evaluation of the process was provided at the conclusion of the year-long primary level in-service. The result was a second year of in-service at the 4-8 level, following the same format, but with the added objective of helping teachers do a better job of teaching reading in the content areas.

Administrative personnel from larger districts have indicated that this process would be too expensive for implementation in their schools. A solution found by a couple of these districts has been to contract with the consultant to videotape presentations with follow-up sessions in larger groups.

Conclusion

The advantages to this in-service model seem to be obvious:

1. there is staff input.
2. objectives are developed.
3. a staff committee prioritizes requests.
4. consultants go through a screening process, thus providing a "match" between objectives and the delivery system expected.
5. the consultant not only presents content, but does so over an extended period of time, additionally providing demonstration sessions as well as follow-up sessions, thus giving teachers a chance to try new ideas in their classrooms, becoming comfortable with their implementation.
6. continued involvement through monthly, one-hour staff follow-up sessions conducted by each building for a period of at least two years is an advantage for assisting the internalizing of the skills, strategies, or methods and assignment of mentors for new teachers.

The disadvantages are probably just as obvious:

1. the process involves board commitment in the allocation of appropriate funding to "do the job".

2. the process demands staff involvement, time and commitment.

The Pleasant Valley District has discovered that the advantages far outweigh the disadvantages -- for the first time we are going beyond lip service in our in-service program, and we are beginning to affect real change in the abilities of our staff and abilities of our students. We are a practicing example that in-service programs don't have to be frustrating and ineffective.

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[1] Joyce, Bruce R., and Showers, Beverly. Power In Staff Development Through Research In Training. ASCD Publications, 1983